

Memorandum

To: Chair and Commissioners

Date: July 3, 2002

From: Diane C. Eidam

File:
Reference Number 1.9
Information

Ref.: RURAL COUNTIES TASK FORCE SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT

For the past fourteen years, the Commission has sponsored the Rural Counties Task Force for the purpose of highlighting rural transportation issues. Celia McAdam, Chair of the Task Force, will provide a briefing on this item regarding the recent activities and accomplishments of the Task Force.

Attachment

RURAL COUNTIES TASK FORCE

Semi Annual Report

July 2002

The Rural Counties Task Force (RCTF) was formed in 1988 as a joint effort between the California Transportation Commission and the 28 rural county Regional Transportation Planning Agencies (RTPAs) and Local Transportation Commissions (CTCs). The purpose of the Task Force is to provide a direct opportunity for the smallest counties of California to remain informed, have a voice, and help shape statewide transportation policies and programs.

The Task Force is an informal organization with no budget or staff. Meetings are held on the third Friday of odd numbered months at the Caltrans Headquarters facility. Kathie Jacobs of the CTC staff acts as liaison to the Task Force, and CTC and Caltrans staff typically attend these meetings to present information or engage in discussions regarding statewide transportation issues that interest and affect rural counties.

The implementation of SB 45 in 1997 significantly increased the responsibilities on transportation planning agencies. The effects were particularly pronounced in the smallest agencies, where modest staffs were now responsible for project specific planning, programming, and monitoring. These changes also intensified the value and purpose of the Task Force.

The past year has been a challenging one for rural agencies alike. Like our urban counterparts, much of our efforts have focused on making the hard decisions and compromises that are necessary to adopt our Regional Transportation Improvement Programs (RTIPs). The CTC has had similar challenges in putting together and adopting the 2002 State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP); those challenges will continue to engage California's transportation planners and programmers through 2002.

Those efforts have greatly focused the list of challenges and accomplishments that have involved Task Force members thusfar in 2002, as well as the issues that will continue to confront Task Force members in the future.

ISSUES and CHALLENGES

STIP Programming Capacity

We share the concerns of our urban counterparts in the allocation of the scarce resources still available in the 2002 STIP. There is a mere \$123 million in programming capacity still remaining, with nearly \$649 million in unprogrammed balances.

Approximately \$84 million of the unprogrammed balances are in 19 rural counties, with totals ranging from \$18.6 million to a mere \$4,000. In contrast, 18 urban areas account for over \$550 million of unprogrammed dollars. In other words, rural counties comprise over half the counties with unprogrammed balances, but account for only about 13% of the dollars.

We recognize there is already tremendous pressure on the Commission to allocate the limited amount of remaining programming capacity. We commend the CTC for making all the regions pointedly aware of the dilemma and for the efforts to make the programming of the remaining dollars as equitable as possible.

Efforts

The Rural Counties Task Force has participated in the workshops and meetings regarding the programming dilemma, and have supported the Commission's efforts by relaying information to Task Force members that may not have been able to attend.

Continuing Issues

- While the Task Force strongly supports the Commission's approach to give all regions an equal shot at the unprogrammed balances, it may be difficult for some rural counties to provide sophisticated presentations to support the very real needs for programming capacity. Therefore, any guidance that can be provided to assist rural counties in presenting their requests would be greatly appreciated.

Environmental Streamlining for Federal Regulations

Federal environmental regulation compliance continues to be one of the greatest challenges to on-time, on-budget project delivery. While an issue throughout California, it is a particularly daunting challenge for rural areas; rural areas are planning some of the most significant bypass projects in the state, including the Willits Bypass, Prunedale Bypass, Lincoln Bypass, and Angels Camp Bypass, which bring up significant environmental issues.

The problem is, this is a process we have little or no control over. Direction and level of detail agreed to earlier in the process is often changed midstream; consultations that should take a matter of weeks can often take months or years; even obtaining information on what the hold up is, at best, difficult. We are more than willing to negotiate mitigations that are fair and equitable, but the process, as it is currently implemented, negates progress.

Our frustrations with the Federal Highway Administration and other federal regulatory agencies are shared throughout California, by Caltrans and our urban counterparts. For those reasons, federal streamlining has been included in the California Consensus Principles for TEA-21 Reauthorization.

Efforts

The Rural County Task Force has pledged to assist in whatever way possible to improve the timelines for Federal approvals for major transportation projects.

Meanwhile, RCTF members serve on the Caltrans Small Project Streamlining Committee, designed to find ways to move small transportation projects forward in an expeditious manner.

Continuing Issues

- Timelines for wending through the Federal process simply cannot be accurately predicted, and it is almost entirely out of the control of the sponsoring agency. Rural counties ask that the CTC be aware of and sympathetic to these facts in dealing with timely use of funds issues.

Local Road Rehabilitation and Maintenance Funding

The State's smallest counties generally have proportionately higher miles of roadways with the fewest resources to maintain them. The CTC recognized this need when, in 1998, the Commission opened the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) to local road rehabilitation projects. Many of these projects were added, including those in rural areas, even though rehabilitation projects do not fit well with the intent or mechanics of the STIP. The Task Force acknowledges and appreciates the Commission's efforts to widen the description of rehabilitation project and work with rural counties to make these projects fit better into the STIP.

The passage of Proposition 42, combined with the Governor's Traffic Congestion Relief Program (TCRP), has provided a new source of funding for road rehabilitation. Unfortunately, the city and county apportionments to rural areas from these programs will not come close to meeting the identified needs.

Efforts

The Task Force has continuously focused on reducing the \$1 billion backlog of rehab projects that would bring county roads up to "good" condition, as well as providing a dedicated funding source for the \$50 million needed annually to maintain those roads in good condition.

Rural counties are concerned that the passage of Proposition 42 would lead people to think the road rehab issue has been resolved. Task Force members have been working with the legislature on proposals to assure the place of road rehabilitation in future funding cycles, and help address the ongoing backlog.

Continuing Issues

- Until a sufficient, dedicated funding source is found **and** the backlog is eliminated, small rural counties continue to need the option of using STIP funds for road rehabilitation.

Interregional Transportation Improvement Program (ITIP) Funding Levels

Under SB 45, 25% of the STIP is to be programmed into the ITIP, with primary focus outside of urban areas. Just as RTIP projects are selected by the regional agencies, ITIP projects are selected by Caltrans and approved by the CTC.

Like regional agencies, Caltrans has been faced with far more project needs than there are funds available. This has generated some discussion about changes to the SB 45 funding distribution formula that would allocate more money to the ITIP.

We certainly share the frustration of too many projects and not enough money. However, rural counties fear that changes to the distribution formula to shift more dollars to the ITIP would only make the situation worse, leaving rural agencies with even less of a say on project priorities. Even small changes to the dollars can make crucial changes to rural projects, and any RTIP shift creates a potential for long needed projects to remain unfunded.

Efforts

Rural counties have participated in discussions regarding the potential funding redistribution, and pledge to continue to remain engaged.

Continuing Issues

- The focus of our efforts should be on protecting existing funding and developing new sources, not on redistributing what allocations we currently receive.

Project Funding Sources

Clearly, existing resources are not sufficient to make the capital improvements needed to provide effective transportation systems in rural areas. These transportation improvements are identified in the local Regional Transportation Plans (RTPs), which must provide a “financially realistic” project list. More and more counties find themselves unable to reconcile their project needs with their realistic funding expectations over the 20 year life of the plan.

Efforts

About half of the counties represented by the Task Force have expressed interest or have taken steps to pursue the approach taken by many urban areas: a local sales tax for transportation. While many rural counties could meet a 50% or 55% majority threshold, few - if any - could meet the currently required 2/3 majority.

Another proposal to generate transportation funding is the Transportation Congestion Relief and Safe School Bus Act, which is slated for the November 2002 ballot. This initiative would direct 30% of the state's share of the sales tax on new and used vehicles to a new transportation fund, with specific distribution parameters. Member agencies are reviewing this proposal.

Continuing Issues

- Rural counties join our urban counterparts to try to develop additional sources of funding, such as SCA 5, for needed transportation projects.

Information Sharing/Staff Development

The complexities of transportation planning and programming apply to urban and rural areas alike. Staff at rural transportation agencies, however, must often struggle to keep up with the complex and ever changing requirements, let alone advocate for their agency's point of view. One of the primary purposes for the Rural Counties Task Force is to provide a means of sharing of information amongst rural transportation agencies and advocating for shared concerns.

Rural Counties Task Force meetings provide an effective means to distribute information and share concerns. We have also been discussing the idea of convening a conference to provide more in depth examination of specific shared concerns, as well as provide junior staff members with training. Another benefit cited is to better network amongst other rural transportation professionals. However, the funding and planning required have hampered efforts to date.

Efforts

The Rural Counties Task Force is joining with the California Association for Commuter Transportation (CalACT) to share a two and one-half day conference at the Konocti Harbor Resort in rural Lake County on October 16-18, 2002. While still in the planning stages, RCTF sessions are expected to focus on environmental compliance, local assistance programs, tribal government relations, best practices in project management and delivery, and management of overall work programs.

Continuing Issues

- The Rural Counties Task Force would like to cordially invite the CTC and other interested parties to mark their calendars for October 16 - 18 and join us at our first annual conference.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Caltrans Local Assistance

The effects of SB 45 have included a significant increased demand on Caltrans Local Assistance. Rural counties in particular depend on the expertise of the Local Assistance program to guide us through the maze of federal and state requirements. We appreciate Caltrans' response to this need, by increasing the staffing for Local Assistance and practicing more direct outreach to the local jurisdictions.

While the improvements to Local Assistance is important, these Caltrans staffers can only go so far. For example, they can help explain the new Federal DBE requirements or how to process a federal environmental document, but they cannot send staff to a small city or county to actually implement either. This is why the Task Force members still need additional PPM funds and state-only funding.

Task Force members want to thank the CTC for facilitating discussions with Caltrans Local Assistance to identify improvements. Members have been working successfully with their districts' Local Assistance program to facilitate better communications and information flow between Caltrans and project sponsors and improve project delivery.

Interregional Transportation Improvement Program (ITIP)

The 2002 ITIP represented a strong commitment on the part of Caltrans to work in partnership with local agencies to implement projects on state highways. Because the primary focus of the ITIP is outside of urban areas, there is a particularly strong connection between RTIP and ITIP projects for rural areas, since so many of our members' largest transportation challenges are on the state highway system. At the same time, many of these projects have price tags that far outstrip the ability of the local agencies to fund them. That is where ITIP participation becomes so critical.

In the 2002 STIP includes over \$177 million in state highway projects in 14 rural counties. Phrased another way, only one rural ITIP submission for \$392,000 was not included in the final list.

The Task Force is particularly enthused about the way Caltrans has addressed the 2002 ITIP. Caltrans was more proactive in seeking RTIP/ITIP partnerships with local agencies. Although the final lists were not available quite as quickly as first anticipated, this new approach represents a far higher level of communication between Caltrans and local agencies about the Department's priorities. Of particular value is the commitment of Jim Nicholas and his staff to work with local agencies early, to identify projects and potential funding opportunities. We look for these efforts to continue as we move towards the 2004 STIP.

State Level Committee Participation

In addition to those issues and efforts listed above, various Task Force members are also providing a rural perspective to the following efforts. Many of these efforts involve participation on committees established by Caltrans.

- Interregional Transportation Strategic Plan
- AB1012 Implementation Steering Committee
- SB 45 Project Monitoring/Reporting Data Base
- Local Assistance "Enhanced Training and Outreach"
- Caltrans, City, County, Federal Highway Administration Coordinating Group
- State Planning Guidelines Development Quality Assurance Team
- California Transportation Investment Strategy (CTIS)
- TEA-21 Federal Reauthorization
- FTA 5310, Welfare to Work Advisory Committee, Rural Transit Issues
- Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS)
- Small Project Streamlining Committee
- Context Sensitive Solutions Committee
- Transportation for Economic Development Advisory Committee

Members of the Task Force also actively coordinate with other statewide groups to share information and perspective on transportation issues. These other groups include:

- Regional Transportation Planning Agency (RTPA) Group
- California Association of Councils of Government (CALCOG)
- Regional-Caltrans Coordinating Group
- Regional Council of Rural Counties (RCRC)